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MANHUNT

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Laura kept riding him, and riding him. Just because he was short? Couldn't drink much? Walked in a certain way?



The Wire Loop

BY
STEVE
HARBOR

KARL KRADER folded the newspaper and put it on the end table. "It's queer, all right. He kills the girls, but doesn't touch them otherwise. Either before or after. Evidently he gets his thrill just from the strangling."

His wife Laura turned her head to Norman Calmet. "Is that it, Norman? Is that how he gets his thrills?" Her gray eyes waited for him to speak.

Norman's small fingers drummed on the arm of the easy chair as he talked. "I'd hardly think so. He's killing something he hates and he'll do it over and over again until he's caught or finally decides he's even with the world."

Karl brushed a lock of blond hair from his forehead. "It's been ten days since the last one. Maybe he's finished killing now."

Norman Calmet was a small man of thirty-five with the neatness and primness of a man who hates germs and disorder. Usually he wore glasses, but it was a point of vanity with him not to when he spent an evening at Karl's house. He was beginning to get a headache, but he preferred that to looking owlish.

"I imagine he simply enjoys killing," Laura said.

"Perhaps he does," Norman said. "And perhaps he suffers terrible pangs of conscience."

Laura smiled at the thin stream of smoke from the cigarette she held. "That's remarkable. A conscience in a deviate."

Norman's moist fingers reached for his glass. "Well, I'd hardly call murder a deviation. Though technically I suppose you're right."

His eyes went to his carefully polished size six shoes and he felt the familiar waves of heat anger as Laura watched him. He brought the glass to his lips, wishing he were the kind of a man who could drink a lot without getting sick. He felt sure that liquor would help him to meet anyone's eyes.

"Perhaps he's been jilted by some girl," Laura said. "That could be possible, couldn't it, Normie? Or does he just hate women?"

"Evidently not all women," Karl said. "Just the small ones. Three high school girls, so far, and one office girl of nineteen.

None of them weighed more than one ten."

Karl rose and began collecting the empty glasses. "He's been lucky so far. No one's even got a look at him."

"Someone terrifically strong, wouldn't you say so, Normie?" Laura asked.

Norman handed his glass to Karl. "Very little whiskey in mine."

"He didn't need any particular strength," Karl said. "He had a wire loop with some sort of a rod. All he had to do was to slip the noose over his victim's neck and twist the rod. It wouldn't take much muscle to do that."

He stopped in the doorway to the kitchen. "By the way, Laura, did you know that Norman's picked up a girl friend." He grinned. "About time too, Norman. You're not getting any younger." He disappeared into the kitchen and in a few moments they heard the clatter of glasses and the sound of the refrigerator door being opened.

Laura put her chin on the palm of her hand and studied Norman. "A girl? How nice. Is it an experiment?"

Norman turned on her, his voice soft, but angry. "Why do you talk to me like that?"

"Like what?" A smile flickered on her lips. "What's her name, Normie?"

Norman turned his eyes from

her. "Vivian Kirk. A student in one of my classes."

She smiled as she watched him. "I've been wondering about something, Normie. You don't have to continue teaching at the University now, do you? Not after all the money your father left you?"

"No, I don't," Norman said firmly. "But I want to."

"I see," Laura said. "And of course you wouldn't want to leave the friends you've made here. Isn't that it?"

At a quarter to ten, Norman rose to leave. Karl and Laura saw him to the door.

"Now be careful, Normie," Laura said. "Take the lighted streets. And be careful how you walk. The strangler might have bad eyesight."

Norman cursed softly as he walked away, conscious that Laura still watched him from the doorway. He tried controlling his walk, making long manly strides, his body stiff against unnecessary motion. Turning the corner, he relaxed somewhat, falling back into the short mincing steps that were more natural to him.

At his morning ten o'clock class, Vivian Kirk, sitting at a desk in the front row, winked at him. She was a small girl with dark brown hair. Norman was quite aware that she was pretty, but he also regarded the temper lines near her eyes with some trepidation.

He fought down a flush of irri-

tation. Damn the girl, he thought. Chemical Engineering is a man's subject. Why doesn't the girl leave me alone. But Norman knew why not and he wished almost sincerely that he had only his professor's salary to depend on.

All he really wanted from life was peace and the society of a few choice friends. And if it hadn't been for the whispers and smirks of the faculty members and the students, Norman thought that he still might have been able to keep her at arm's length. But he'd been unable to endure the talk, and finally had had to talk to Vivian, if for no other reason than to prove that he wasn't being frightened by a girl. Any girl.

He remembered the dates he'd had with her; the evenings spent in a movie theater, sitting rigid as Vivian put her hand on his and smiled, her teeth white and sharp in the semi-darkness of the theater.

Norman went through his lecture avoiding her eyes and when the bell rang, he gathered up his notes wearily and joined her in the hall. He wore his glasses.

"Hello, darling," she said, her eyes steady and her mouth smiling.

Norman glanced about self-consciously. "Hello, Vivian." He frowned ostentatiously at his watch. "I'm afraid I'll have to rush. I've an appointment in the cafeteria with Professor Krader."

Vivian lifted a knowing eye-

brow. "How tragic. I thought I might have lunch with you."

"I'm really sorry, Vivian, but this is awfully important."

She ran a hand over his cheek. "Of course, darling. I wouldn't want to keep you from your work. But you will see me tonight, won't you? Call for me at about seven."

Krader was downstairs at their table. Norman noticed that as usual the tables around Karl were occupied by Coeds. It was always that way, Norman reflected. Karl, tall and with broad shoulders, always attracted women.

"How's it going with Vivian?" Karl asked.

Norman carefully conveyed a spoon of soup to his mouth and swallowed. "Fine. I'm taking her out again tonight."

Karl let his eyes go around the room and he smiled at some of the girls. "Nice red-head in the corner," he said.

Norman kept his eyes on his food and said what was expected of him. "You really shouldn't notice things like that."

Karl shrugged his shoulders. "There's no harm in being friendly." He stirred his coffee. "By the way, what's this between you and my wife this last week or so? What I mean is why does she have it in for you?"

"I don't know," Norman said.

"The other day I told her about how you saved my life on Okinawa. She laughed about it."

Yes, Norman thought bitterly, she would laugh. How ridiculous. Normie in the army? And a hero too? You must be joking.

"Somehow she got the idea that you were a 4-F, or something," Karl said.

Norman looked up to find Karl staring darkly at a petite blond girl and a good-looking boy who took seats at a table near by. "Damn bitch," Karl muttered.

Norman called for Vivian at precisely seven-thirty. She met him outside the Sorority House dressed in a fluffy sweater and with a light coat thrown over her shoulders.

"They have a new 3-D at the State," Norman said. "Should be quite absorbing and I understand educational."

She took his arm. "Who wants to see a stuffy movie on a night like this."

Norman had no choice but to fall in step with her. They passed couples strolling arm in arm and Norman was certain they turned to watch him.

Vivian led him to a bench and they sat down. She examined him with disconcerting objectivity and her eyes reflected the moonlight. "You love me, don't you, darling," she said.

Norman felt panic rising within him.

"You do, don't you?" her voice was silk with a hard glowing sheen.

The thought of the irritating

smiling faculty members flashed through Norman's mind and he remembered the oblique taunts of Laura. "Of course, I do," he heard himself say defiantly. He was startled, but he repeated it experimentally. "Yes. I love you."

Vivian's smile was lazy and satisfied and Norman could feel a chill at the back of his neck. She moved closer to him. "Well?" she said. "Aren't you going to kiss me?"

Norman's arms went slowly and reluctantly around her. Their lips met for several seconds. Her lips were warm and in spite of himself he felt a strange excitement. He caressed her cheek, and his fingers slid down gradually just under her chin. Her throat was soft too, so soft, and he could feel the excitement growing.

He heard footsteps coming up the path and guiltily took away his hands. Vivian stood up and brushed her skirt. "I'm hungry," she said. "Let's go someplace where there are lights and people."

They began walking. "Lord how I hate that awful Chemistry," Vivian said. "I don't think I'm the type for college, do you Normie?"

By nine o'clock Vivian had developed her usual headache and Norman dropped her off at the Sorority house. He went away in a gloomy mood, following an aimless route until he found himself in the neighborhood of Karl Krader's house. He went slowly

toward it and stood outside for a minute before going up the stairs and ringing the bell.

Laura answered the door. "Why, how nice to see you, Normie," she said. Her gray eyes glimmered with faint mockery.

Karl came out of the bathroom, lather on his face and holding a safety razor in one hand. Norman noticed the suppleness of Karl's arms, the smooth tan of his shoulders, and the perfectly tapered torso. He turned away and found that Laura was watching him with narrowed eyes.

"Sit down, Normie," Laura said. "I'll get you a drink. She spoke to Karl with an edge in her voice. "Go back into the bathroom and finish shaving."

Norman rested in an easy chair while Laura went into the kitchen to make the drink. He picked a magazine from the rack beside the chair and noticed that it was a physical culture publication. He leafed through the pages idly scanning the glossy photographs of nearly nude young men in poses emphasizing their shining oiled bodies.

Laura returned with the drink and Norman returned the magazine to the rack.

"Cigarette?" she asked. And then seemed to remember with a smile. "Oh, I forgot. You don't smoke, Normie."

Norman met her eyes tiredly.
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And he shaves too, just in case you were wondering." Karl came out of the bathroom stuffing his shirt into his trousers. He picked up his jacket and put it on. "Sorry to leave you, Norman. But I've got a department meeting tonight. I can't get out of it and I'm late as it is."

"But you'll stay, won't you, Normie?" Laura said. "Unless you're afraid to be here alone with me."

"Sure," Karl said, grinning. "The strangler hasn't been doing anything for some time now, and who knows, this might be his night."

"We'll protect each other, dear," Laura said. "If he breaks in, I'll fight him off while Normie phones for the police."

Karl went to the door. "But seriously, Laura, I don't want you to leave the house alone."

After he was gone Laura turned on the phonograph for quiet music. "I've been wondering about you and Karl," she said. "You've been friends all your life, haven't you?"

"Yes," Norman said. "All our lives and we went into the army together. They accepted me without hesitation."

They watched each other silently and then Laura rose and went to the closet. She returned with her coat. "I'm going to the drugstore for cigarettes," she said. She picked up a large handbag and waited.

Norman got to his feet.

The moon glowed dully behind the scudding clouds and the streets were shadowed between the lonely street lamps. After they walked a block, Laura said, "I know that Karl is apparently more friendly with his Coeds than he should be."

"There's nothing to it," Norman said.

"I was quite disturbed by it at first. Considerably so. But not now. The truth gradually dawned on me that he really wasn't interested in girls at all. He was merely trying to show the world that he was something that he was not. He isn't interested in women, is he Normie?"

Norman's voice was low and controlled. "You really can't tell by the way a man looks, Laura. You can't tell it by the way they walk, or by their delicate manner. And quite a few of them do get married . . . for one reason or another. It must have been a surprise to you to find that out."

"In a way it's funny," Laura said. "I thought the real reason you came to the house was because you wanted to see me. I was flattered."

Norman shook his head sadly. "I may look like I'm one, Laura, but I'm not. And Karl is. And so we're friends, and only that."

Laura stopped. "I don't believe that. I still love him, Normie, and I don't believe what you're saying."

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Norman looked deep into the darkness of the empty lot beside which they stood and then along the deserted street. This could be a place, he thought. A man could hide here and wait. Perhaps there would be a scream, but not if he were careful.

Norman heard the snap as Laura opened her purse, then dropped it. He bent down to pick it up.

"It's bad about those girls," Laura said, her voice above him. "But I didn't know then. I thought it was young women he wanted and I hated all of them."

Norman's head jerked back as the wire tightened around his neck. It cut deep into his flesh as Laura twisted the rod, and before the pain made him deaf to sound, he heard her low mad laughter.